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Training Adult ESL Learners in Metacognitive Reading Strategies

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Abstract

This article is written as a practical guide to aid teachers in metacognitive reading strategy instruction. The nature of metacognitive strategies is explored, followed by specific procedures for implementing effective metacognitive strategy instruction in the adult ESL classroom. Chamot and O'Malley's (1994) five-phase strategy instruction framework is utilized as a foundation, with the addition of specific instructional recommendations for each phase.

Introduction

Learning to read in a second language as an adult can be an overwhelming, complex undertaking. It is an unfolding process that takes time and concentrated effort on the part of the learner. Second language (L2) readers, particularly those at lower proficiency levels, may have to "repair more gaps in their understanding" than when reading in their first language (L1) (Block, 1992, p. 320). They must be able to draw on prior knowledge and employ various strategies to decipher the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary, text structures, cohesive devices, cultural references, and more.

Successful L2 readers engage in a high level of metacognition, or monitoring of their own thinking, during the process of reading. For example, they make predictions, test hypotheses, and monitor their comprehension while extracting meaning from text. Less proficient L2 readers, however, tend to focus heavily on word recognition and word-for-word translation (Auerbach & Paxton, 1997; Carell, 1989; Rusciolelli, 1995). As a result, they may employ fewer higher-order thinking processes while reading and may tend to be less metacognitively aware (Grabe, 1995; Rusciolelli, 1995).

Clearly metacognition is critical to effective reading in an L2. In fact, Anderson (2005) posited that the ability to employ metacognitive skills effectively and monitor reading is the most important contributing factor to reading success. Numerous research studies have examined ESL readers' use of specific metacognitive strategies, and findings have consistently indicated a significant relationship between metacognitive strategy use and L2 reading proficiency (e.g., Block, 1992; Carrell, 1989; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

More importantly, research has also demonstrated that explicit instruction in using metacognitive reading

strategies is beneficial for adult L2 readers. Results of a number of experimental studies (e.g., Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989; Cubukcu, 2008; Huang & Newbern, 2012) have indicated significant gains in reading proficiency of adult ESL learners following metacognitive strategy training. Notably, in all of the aforementioned studies, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on objective assessments which measured reading proficiency gains.

The above findings point to the need for teachers to provide explicit strategy instruction for adult L2 readers. Strategy instruction can and should be integrated with regular classroom activity (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Cohen, 1998; Oxford & Leaver, 1996). This article is written as a practical guide to aid teachers in this endeavor. In the sections to follow, we (a) explore the nature of metacognitive strategies and (b) demonstrate procedures for implementing effective metacognitive strategy instruction in the adult ESL classroom.

Metacognitive Strategies

Broadly speaking, metacognitive strategies are a type of *language learning strategy.* As defined by Rebecca Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). Chamot and O'Malley's (1994) taxonomy of language learning strategies identifies three major types of strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective. Oxford's (1990) more comprehensive model, which is presented in her *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL), divides language learning strategies into six types: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social.

Most language learning strategy research that has been conducted since the early 1990's has incorporated the SILL. Numerous studies have shown a significant correlation between language learning strategy use and English proficiency in ESL/EFL settings worldwide (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Based on a thorough review of learning strategy research, Anderson (2005) hypothesizes that metacognitive strategies likely play the most important role in second language acquisition.

Metacognitive strategies are language learning strategies which involve *planning, monitoring, and/or evaluating* one's own learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1994; Oxford, 1990). Importantly, these strategies "provide a mechanism for individuals to coordinate their own learning processes" (Oxford, 1990, p. 136).

Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001), who have conducted research regarding metacognitive awareness and use of reading strategies among L2 readers, define metacognitive strategies for reading as "intentional, carefully planned techniques by which learners monitor or manage their reading" (p. 436). For example, a learner who previews a text, makes predictions, and tests his or her hypotheses while reading is employing metacognitive strategies. Some additional examples of metacognitive strategies utilized by effective readers are (a) setting a purpose for reading, (b) noting characteristics of a given text, and (c) using context clues while reading (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001).

Mokhtari and Sheorey's (2002) *Survey of Reading Strategies* (SORS), identifies three broad categories: Global Reading Strategies, Problem Solving Reading Strategies, and Support Reading Strategies. The survey, along with its scoring guide, is available as a free download at: http://laurenyal.myefolio.com/Uploads/Survey2002Mokhtari.pdf.

Implementing Metacognitive Strategy Training

A number of models for language learning strategy instruction have been proposed (e.g., Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990, Pearson & Dole, 1987). One of the most widely-used models is found in Chamot and O'Malley's (1994) *Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach* (CALLA). The CALLA program was developed for teaching content and academic language in K-12 settings; however, the strategy instruction framework contained in the program is well-suited for use with adult learners. Chamot and

O'Malley's strategy instruction framework includes five phases: *preparation*, *presentation*, *practice*, *evaluation*, and *expansion*.

This section of the article describes a set of specific procedures for metacognitive strategy instruction. We utilize the five phases of the Chamot and O'Malley (1994) framework, with the addition of specific instructional recommendations for each phase. By following these procedures, teachers will likely find it easy to teach any metacognitive strategy that they deem beneficial for their students.

In this article, we demonstrate how to use the procedures to teach one broad-based metacognitive reading strategy called SQP2RS, or *Squeepers*. This strategy, adapted from Vogt and Echevarria (2008), reinforces several metacognitive strategies for reading: predicting, self-questioning, clarifying, evaluating, and summarizing (Vogt & Echevarria, 2008). The abbreviation SQP2RS stands for *survey*, *question*, *predict*, *read*, *respond*, and *summarize*.

Phase I: Preparation

The purpose of this initial stage, *preparation*, is two-fold: (a) to help students become aware of the strategies they are already using and (b) to prepare students for strategy instruction. This is an important stage which should be carefully planned. Three instructional recommendations are: (a) elicit students' prior knowledge, (b) name and display the strategy, and (c) provide motivation.

Recommendation #1: Elicit students' prior knowledge. At the beginning of a semester or course, identify students' prior knowledge of strategies and strategy use as a precursor to designing instruction. One way to elicit students' awareness of metacognitive strategies is to administer Mokhtari and Sheorey's (2002) *Survey of Reading Strategies* (SORS). The SORS consists of 30 questions measuring three broad categories of metacognitive reading strategies: Global Reading Strategies, Problem Solving Reading Strategies, and Support Reading Strategies. As noted earlier in the article, the survey, along with its scoring guide, can be retrieved and downloaded free of charge online.

Another way to elicit students' prior knowledge of metacognitive strategies is to conduct informal interviews. Teachers can interview students in groups of three or four and ask them to indicate the techniques they use when reading. Questions such as "what do you do if you do not know the meaning of a word?" and "how do you know what an article is about before reading the article?" can generate meaningful feedback from students.

Recommendation #2: Name and display the strategy. Give each strategy a name and make a poster for each strategy to be taught over the course of one semester. An example of a poster for the SQP2RS strategy, "squeepers", is shown below.

SQP2RS ("Squeepers")

Survey
Question
Predict
Read
Respond
Summarize

Giving each strategy a name allows the teacher and students to talk about the learning process. Making a poster for the strategy helps students to remember the strategy throughout the semester so they can retrieve and use it when needed. Teachers can also have students make a poster for display after a given strategy is taught.

Recommendation #3: Provide motivation. Adult English learners, especially those at lower proficiency levels, often lack confidence in their ability to improve their reading. It is important for teachers to build their confidence from the beginning. Tell students that research shows that effective readers tend to use a set of

strategies while reading, whereas poor readers do not seem to know of their existence or do not know when and how to effectively apply them. Ask students "Who do you think is an effective reader?" While students are attempting to respond to the question, tell them, "You are."

Phase II: Presentation

This second phase is the core of the Chamot and O'Malley (1994) framework, where the strategy is presented and demonstrated. Instructional recommendations for this phase are: (a) explain the learning strategy, and (b) explicitly model the strategy.

Recommendation #1: Explain the learning strategy. Explain the purpose for each strategy before modeling it. For example, before teaching SQP2RS, ask students what effective readers do before, during, and after reading a text. Build on the answers provided by students, explain that effective readers survey the text, generate questions about the text, and predict answers to their questions before reading. These steps activate prior knowledge and help them think actively about the text. During reading, effective readers read the text and examine if they asked the right questions and if their predictions were correct. Confirming and rejecting predictions helps the learner identify key ideas of the text. Finally, after reading, writing a short summary helps them remember the main ideas and eliminate unnecessary information.

Recommendation #2: Model the strategy explicitly. To model SQP2RS, we recommend using the following procedures, which are adapted from Vogt and Echevarria (2008):

- **Survey**: Teach students to survey a reading passage by modeling your own thinking process using a think-aloud. Display the passage on a document camera or make a transparency, and model how you would survey the passage. For example, say aloud, "The title says *Holidays in America*. This helps me know what the article is about. I also see red bolded sub-headings. This means they are important …"
- **Question**: Ask students to work in pairs or triads to formulate questions about the passage. For example, you may say, "Based on our survey, think of 2-3 questions that you think will be answered by this passage." Next, ask each group to share one question in turn. As each group reports their questions, record them on a whiteboard (or chart paper). When each group has had an opportunity to share one question, begin another round of question sharing. This will allow all groups to have an opportunity to contribute their ideas.
- **Predict**: Ask the class to predict answers to each question generated in the previous step, and write the answers next to the questions on the whiteboard.
- **Read**: Read aloud the first section of the passage while the students follow along on their copies. After reading a few paragraphs, stop and refer students to the list of predictions on the whiteboard. Next to each prediction that was confirmed, put a "+", and next to each prediction that was disconfirmed, put a "-". At this point, direct students to read the rest of the passage within their dyads or triads, confirming and disconfirming predictions as demonstrated.
- **Respond**: Have students work in their dyad or triad groups to review the questions that were posted earlier and see if they have found answers based on their reading of the passage. For any questions that were not answered in the passage, lead students in a discussion of why this may be the case; and help them understand how to draw on clues to generate more relevant questions in the future. Conclude the discussion by asking, "What additional questions could we have raised?"
- **Summarize**: Ask each student to write a few sentences to summarize the passage.

The demonstration and explanation of a strategy should

be as complete as possible, with each step clearly identified. The teacher may need to demonstrate the strategy with more than one example, inviting students to take part in the demonstration after the strategy has been initially presented.

Phase III: Practice

During this phase, teachers provide opportunities for students to practice the strategy. Instructional recommendations for this phase are (a) practice the strategy with a new reading passage, (b) use authentic reading materials (e.g., newspaper articles, online news stories), and (c) provide different cooperative learning structures.

Recommendation #1: Practice the strategy with a new reading passage. Direct students to practice the SQP2RS strategy in dyads or triads using a new reading passage. Have them complete all of the steps outlined in Phase II (i.e., survey, question, predict, read, respond, and summarize). For each step, provide specific directions so that all the learners know exactly what to do. For example, under *survey* in the reading directions, ask students to read the title and headings, view pictures, and discuss with partners what they think the text is about.

Recommendation #2: Use authentic reading materials. When selecting reading passages for practice of the strategy, try to choose authentic materials that students might encounter in real-life. For example, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, a driver's manual, and/or materials sent home by their children's schools can all be used. Passages from the class textbook can also be good options. Utilizing authentic reading materials helps connect the use of strategies with real-life tasks, thus enhancing student motivation.

Recommendation #3: Provide different cooperative learning structures. To maximize strategy learning, use a variety of cooperative learning structures – moving from whole class to small group, whole class to pairs or triads, and small group to individual practice. Varying learning structures provides students with opportunities to process the new information more effectively.

For example, after a whole class demonstration, pair lower proficiency students with higher performing classmates to practice the reading strategy. This cooperative grouping structure provides scaffolding for lower proficiency students. Encourage students to think out loud when going through the process. Circulate the classroom during the process, and provide support when requested. In addition, provide opportunities for each student to practice the strategy independently.

Phase IV: Self-Evaluation

In the *self-evaluation* phase, teachers provide opportunities for students to reflect on their strategy use and assess their own success in using it. Instructional recommendations for this phase are (a) foster self-reflection, and (b) incorporate student self-assessment.

Recommendation #1: Foster self-reflection. It is important for teachers to create a classroom climate in which learners feel they can experiment with their language learning (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). Dialog journals can be utilized to help students reflect on how the specific strategy that was taught and practiced in class facilitates their learning process and how effective they are in using the strategy. Informal interviews can also be conducted for the same purpose. Utilizing the dialog journals and informal interviews also provides students with opportunities to practice such languages skills as writing and speaking.

Recommendation #2: Incorporate student self-assessment. Student self-aassessment gives learners an opportunity to think about and assess their own learning. A quick and easy self-assessment tool is called *Numbers 3, 2, 1* (Vogt & Echevarria, 2008). At the end of the strategy instruction, ask the students to indicate with one, two, or three fingers how well they think they understand and can use the specific strategy:

3 = I fully understand and can use it independently.
2= I understand but still need more practice in order to use it independently.
1= I don't understand and don't know when and how to use it.

With a multi-faceted strategy such as SQP2RS, teachers can incorporate the *Numbers 3, 2, 1* strategy to have students provide feedback at each step (i.e., survey, question, predict, read, respond, and summarize).

Phase V: Expansion

In this phase, students are encouraged to (a) apply the strategy outside the classroom and (b) share their strategy use with others. Because transfer of learning is an important goal for adult learners, this is a critical stage where students move from the classroom to the real world.

Recommendation #1: Apply the strategy outside the classroom. Provide a structured learning task in which students apply the strategies in real life on their own, outside of the classroom. For example, as homework assignment, ask each student to use the SQP2RS strategy consciously in the context of a real-life task such as reading a newspaper, a store catalog, or an online article.

Recommendation #2: Invite students to share their experiences. You may invite students to share in class what they read, what strategies they used, and how effective their strategy use was. Not all strategies are useful for all learning tasks. Encourage students to try a different strategy taught at a previous time for the same task and compare the two strategies.

Conclusion

The strategy instruction procedures and recommendations presented in this article can be applied to the teaching of other metacognitive strategies, such as *Semantic Mapping*, *T-List*, or *Split Page Note Taking* (Vogt & Echevarria, 2008). They are also adaptable, as they can be modified at a number of points to suit various topics, student needs, and teacher preferences. For example, in the preparation stage, successful former English language learners can be invited as guest speakers to discuss the importance of strategy use, with the aim of promoting student motivation. Also, in the *practice* stage, teachers can work with lower proficiency students while other learners work in groups or individually. This structure allows for needed differentiation, particularly for multi-level classes.

Integrating metacognitive reading strategy instruction into adult ESL classrooms is a challenge that all language teachers should take. It not only facilitates learners becoming more efficient in their efforts to learn a second language, but it also motivates and empowers them to function as autonomous learners.

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